

Active Living Ramsey County!

Promoting Active Living Principles

St. Paul, MN (Ramsey County)



Formation

Active Living refers to changing the built environment—the physical structures and infrastructure of communities—to create opportunities for physical activity that are practical and enjoyable.¹ The premise is that a built environment that encourages walking, bicycling, and using recreational facilities and will help more people meet the recommendations for physical activity. Benefits of a successful Active Living initiative include: healthier people, safer communities, economic vitality and a more socially connected community.²

Active Living Ramsey County works to bring about and sustain changes in design, transportation, and public/private policies to cultivate and support a way of live that integrates physical activity into daily lives. Active Living Ramsey County is a collaborative effort that includes elected officials and representatives from the county and cities, schools, health

¹ Prevention Institute (2004). *The built environment and health: 11 profiles of neighborhood transformations*.

http://preventioninstitute.org/pdf/BE_full_document_110304.pdf

² Active Living Ramsey County.

http://www.co.ramsey.mn.us/alrc/about_alrc.htm

plans and residents; these partners work together to find ways to make physical activity easier and safer.

Key Events

Active Living Ramsey County (ALRC) was developed with the support of community and business leaders; health plans; city, county and school officials; and residents.

In creating Active Living Ramsey County, a Ramsey County Commissioner sought the support of the County Board. After the county board decided to support the initiative, key county departments were asked to participate, including the health department (Steps to a Healthier St. Paul staff), parks and recreation, public works, and transportation. Similar departments from the City of Saint Paul were also asked to participate. In addition, local city managers, school district members, and other associated bicycling and groups were asked to participate. This diverse group formed a coalition that was instrumental in connecting different governing bodies in the county and representing various perspectives and interests in promoting active living.

LESSON LEARNED:

Diversity. Diversity of interests made Active Living Ramsey County a stronger coalition. Having the involvement of many city and county departments provided a useful collection of perspectives and varying ideas.

Steps to a Healthier St. Paul staff dedicated valuable time and resources to ALRC, which was essential at the beginning stages of the coalition's growth. The coalition received no funding at the beginning and Steps staff wrote grants and printed brochures. A coalition requires people who are

committed enough to spend time on relevant activities and projects. As in any coalition, the members of ALRC had varying levels of commitment and resources available to accomplish the work of the group. Steps staff gave ALRC the necessary footwork to get the coalition moving forward.

Steps staff found that many local officials did not know about or understand the concept of Active Living; however, a little education went a long way in creating a friendly environment for the coalition's work

Active Living Ramsey County's first project began with a partnership with Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota. These partners created a survey to assess St. Paul and Ramsey County residents' perceptions of their physical activity environment. The telephone survey was administered to a random sample of 600 residents of the City of St. Paul and 600 residents of Ramsey County suburbs.³

Major findings from the survey included:

- 57% of St. Paul residents surveyed and 32% of Ramsey County residents surveyed reported no physical activity or low levels of physical activity.
- Respondents' activity levels were higher when they agreed that:
 - there were walking and bicycling trails within bicycling distance from their homes;
 - there were interesting things to look at while walking in their neighborhoods;

- it was safe for children to walk to school in their neighborhoods; and
- trash or graffiti was not a problem in their neighborhoods.

From these findings, Active Living Ramsey County drew a number of conclusions:

- A surprisingly large percentage of both city and suburban residents (57% and 32%, respectively) are "inactive"; thus, encouraging physical activity and providing opportunities for recreation is vital.
- Cities and counties can take actions which impact the activity level of their citizens by conveniently locating trails and playgrounds, creating safer recreational places, and removing graffiti and trash.
- Fostering more physical activity will need a concerted county/local effort. These efforts should include prioritizing construction of more trails and sidewalks in underserved areas, connecting trail systems, increasing public safety of existing and planned trails, and encouraging area walks, trail and sidewalk clean-ups, and hosting block parties through neighborhood associations.

Following the survey, Active Living Ramsey County, with assistance from Blue Cross Blue Shield, hired an organizational consultant from Active Living by Design to work for one year on structuring the ALRC coalition. The consultant worked with ALRC to develop a mission and vision for the group and to align strategic partners.

³ Decision Resources, Ltd. (2006). Active Living Ramsey County! 2005 residential survey. http://www.co.ramsey.mn.us/NR/rdonlyres/C2597178-4723-423F-BED1-1672D40FA995/3752/2005_residential_survey_complete.pdf

[SIDE BAR- ALRC's Mission, "Creating and promoting environments that make it safe and convenient for people to integrate physical activity into their daily routines." ALRC's Vision, "To improve the physical health and safety of Ramsey County residents by positively influencing communities to improve their active community resources through infrastructure, policy and programming changes."]

The four goals developed for ALRC are to improve health, influence policy, enhance the built environment, and engage communities. Steps staff noted that the consultant helped ALRC progress faster by providing direction and a focused approach, giving them a springboard from which to start their work.

ALRC organized workshops across Ramsey County to start educating and promoting the ideas of active living. Walkable and bikeable communities and Safe Routes to School workshops gave stakeholders, coalition members, and interested residents an opportunity to practice the principles of active living. As part of the workshops, participants conducted a walking tour of the community to point out areas that were barriers to walking and bicycling. During these walking tours, many participants from county departments became aware of issues that could be fixed right away and would not require much money. They had never realized how small obstacles (e.g., street lights being located too high for good lighting, disrepairs that had not been reported, and the lack of curb cuts in the appropriate places for easy access for disabled people) affected the walkability of a community.

LESSON LEARNED:

Educate. Steps staff found that many local officials did not know about or understand the concepts of active living. By conducting workshops and inviting local officials to participate, the concepts of Active Living could be learned and applied.

Outcomes

One of the first projects taken on by ALRC was to develop "Pathways to Health." One coalition member realized that when taking her elderly mother out for walks, her mother often needed to stop and rest, which prevented her from going on many walks. ALRC piloted the "Pathways to Health" program in two St. Paul neighborhoods to create corridors to provide a physical environment to encourage walking. The benches are placed in a visibly continuous corridor so people are able to see the next bench. This visible continuity should keep people in motion and encourage them to walk farther because of the availability of benches to use for rest. Through a partnership with the Environmental Health section at Ramsey County Department of Public Health, ALRC was able to obtain benches made from recycled plastic to further promote recycling programs throughout Ramsey County.

LESSON LEARNED:

Play to your Strengths. Placing benches was much more difficult than the coalition expected. Unanticipated questions arose regularly. How much sidewalk land did the city own? Can a citizen build a bench? Having a representative from Ramsey County Parks & Recreation Department who was familiar with the process and had connections within the department helped the project move forward.

Conclusion

The Active Living Ramsey County coalition strives to create and promote environments that make it safe and convenient for Ramsey County residents to be more physically active. By collaborating with many diverse partners, ALRC has the potential to create lifestyle changes in Ramsey County residents by providing greater opportunities for physical activity.

In its infancy, Active Living Ramsey County has created a strong coalition that, in the future, could create lasting environmental changes. Through projects like Pathways to Health, Active Living Ramsey County has begun to change the landscape of Ramsey County to encourage greater physical activity. Increasing awareness of active living principles through community workshops has also given ALRC the opportunity to educate strategic partners. A continual focus on partnership will be necessary as ALRC continues to establish environmental changes. The Active Living Ramsey County coalition can be integral in generating opportunities for Ramsey County residents to engage in active, healthy living.

Additional Resources

Active Living Ramsey County

Website: <http://www.co.ramsey.mn.us/ALRC/index.htm>

Active Living by Design

Website: <http://www.activelivingbydesign.org>

Active Living Network

Website: <http://www.activeliving.org>